

Coaching Tip Number 37

Coaching tips will come out once a month to give you a flavor for what coaches do in an active coach/coachee relationship. If you have others that you would like this tip to go to each month you may send me their name and I will make sure they are added to the distribution list or you may forward this information yourself.

Einstein's Ability to Risk and Willingness to be Wrong by Ron White (Excerpted from *How to Develop the Mind of Einstein*)

The early life of Einstein gives us some clues to the great man that he would become. He was never one to dominate conversation to prove his intellect. Even as a child he didn't talk much. It has been said that he didn't talk until 3 -- there are conflicting accounts on this. However, what is not conflicting is that it took him a little longer to talk than the average child. But, we must remember that Albert Einstein was far from average.

Einstein's parents hardly coddled their first born. They gave him tremendous freedom to roam and grow. This no doubt had a positive outcome on his development. When he was just four years old, he was allowed to roam the neighborhood alone. Believe it or not his parents even encouraged him to cross the street on his own at this young age. They watched behind the first few times to ensure that he looked both ways, but soon he was on his own doing this.

Now, keep in mind when he was crossing the street he wasn't dodging Fords, Chevrolets, Mercedes or cars with a lot of horse power -- he was dodging only horsepower. In other words, he was dodging horse drawn carriages. But, it was still very dangerous for this young child. In our world today, I would not encourage my four year old to roam the neighborhood alone or even allow him near the street. With that being said, the principles of self-reliance and risk that Einstein's parents implemented in his life are ones that we can perhaps model on a smaller scale. Einstein certainly modeled this behavior with his own son on a smaller scale.

In his late twenties, Einstein moved to Zurich with his first wife, Mileva, and their son. Friedrich Adler was living near Einstein and they became great friends. They would often get together to share ideas. Often times their sons would get rowdy and it would be hard for them to talk. Many parents would barge in and tell their sons to be quiet, that they are having a meeting. Not Adler and Einstein, these great thinkers would climb into the attic to carry on their conversation. They allowed their boys to grow and explore even if it was noisy.

His freedom as a child and the freedom he gave his son was, in part, due to his attitude on failure. He was not afraid to fail. After all, he tackled some of the most perplexing questions of our universe. Many would have shied away from tackling these questions simply because the rate of failure seemed extraordinarily high. However, it is evident that Einstein was not afraid to be wrong or to fail.

When Einstein was 50 years old, reporters were hounding Einstein for an interview during which he was working on a unified field theory. Putting the "unified field theory" into layman's terms, this meant he was working on a theory that would put the entire universe into a mathematical equation, and he had the attention of the world. Reporters parked outside his home in hopes of an interview. Many kept all night vigils waiting for the story. As a rule, Einstein did not chase the spotlight and dodged the requests often. It was the same in this instance as well. He did, however, allow an interview with one reporter from the New York Times. You see the New York Times was edited by Carr Van Ande, and Van Ande had found an error in a previous Einstein's equation. Imagine that! The editor of the New York Times finding an error in the math of Einstein! Don't you think that Einstein must have been irate that the editor would point this out? He must have been insulted. Actually, on the contrary, Einstein was impressed and that is the reason he allowed an interview to this reporter from the New York Times. You see Einstein was not afraid to be wrong, and when corrected he was not insulted.

At Princeton, Albert Einstein was more like a kindly uncle. When he arrived in 1935, and was asked what he would require for his study, he replied, "A desk, some pads and a pencil, and a large wastebasket - to hold all of my mistakes."

Albert Einstein spent his last two decades trying to reconcile quantum physics with relativity. His holy grail -- a so-called "Unified Field Theory" -- eluded him. He once casually mentioned to a colleague that he was on the verge of his "greatest discovery ever," before admitting that "it didn't pan out" just two weeks later.

One day in his twilight years, he received a letter from a 15-year-old girl asking for help with a homework assignment. She soon received a curious reply: a page full of unintelligible diagrams, along with an attempt at consolation: "Do not worry about your difficulties in mathematics," Einstein told her, "I can assure you that mine are much greater!"

The man who was the greatest success at mathematics also failed a lot at them. But that didn't stop him from moving forward.

Not only was he willing to risk at math, he also risked when he gambled. While attending a physics symposium in Las Vegas one year, Albert Einstein, to the astonishment of many of his sober-minded colleagues, spent a fair amount of time at the craps and roulette tables.

"Einstein is gambling as if there were no tomorrow," an eminent physicist remarked one day. "What troubles me," another replied, "is that he may know something!"

Too often in life, we attempt to spend all our energy demonstrating how we are right instead of accepting constructive criticism and getting better. This is not true of Einstein. Not only was he not afraid of being wrong, he was not afraid of being corrected. Inquire of yourself, ask yourself honestly: How do you respond when you are corrected? Do you lash out or are you grateful?

If you want to develop the mind of Einstein. You must not be afraid to fail and allow yourself the opportunity to fail. Herman Melville put it this way, "He who has never failed somewhere, that man can not be great."

Thomas Edison when he was constructing the light bulb built 1,000 prototypes that did not work before he successfully built the one that we still use today and will forever. A reporter asked Edison how it felt to fail 1,000 times. Edison replied, "You misunderstand. I did not fail 1,000 times. I successfully found 1,000 ways that the light bulb would not work." Edison, like Einstein, did not view failure the way so many do. They viewed it as acceptable and a way to learn and grow.

The fear of failure could have paralyzed Einstein and Edison, yet it did not. What about you? Are you so paralyzed with fear that you have settled for mediocrity? Don't allow that to happen. Embrace risk and failure. Learn that it is okay to be wrong, and run headlong into the rewards of risk as Einstein did.

Ron White

This article is excerpted from Ron White's, How to Develop the Mind of Einstein